

Report to the State Superintendent:

“Voices from the Field”

Wisconsin Early Childhood Education and Care Considers No Child Left Behind

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

July 27, 2006

This document summarizes thoughts and impressions on the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) received from broad cross sections of Wisconsin’s early childhood education and care community. Input came in the form of responses to a web based survey and other evaluative and ranking exercises conducted in the spring and summer of 2006.

Other reports available on the survey include a listing of all responses submitted to the web survey, a listing of comments collected from participants at the Jolyn Beeman Memorial Conference conference, and a rank order of responses. These reports are available at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/ec/echildhm.html>.

<i>NCLB’s Impact on Early Childhood</i>

While the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation does not specifically include early childhood education, it has had a definite impact on many early childhood programs, including kindergarten, early childhood special education, Title 1, Head Start, child care, and family literacy. NCLB has laudably focused attention on student achievement, closing the achievement gap, and teacher quality at elementary, middle, and high schools. However, many early childhood educators and caregivers are concerned that this same, NCLB-initiated focus on academic skills is plummeting downward to impose inappropriate academic pressures on younger children. Of specific concern are:

Teacher Quality: Wisconsin’s four-year-old kindergarten and early childhood special education programs require appropriately-licensed and qualified teachers. Other early childhood education and care programs such as Head Start and child care do not have these requirements. NCLB’s requirements for teacher quality can help bring this priority to all early childhood education and care programs. Unfortunately, NCLB has changed what teachers do, how they do it, and why they do it. The focus on testing and accountability is resulting in less time for teacher preparation and is reducing teachers’ flexibility to balance instruction and activity.

Testing: NCLB’s focus on testing has led to efforts to document children’s progress by creating outcomes for specific learning expectations. For young children, however, this focus on outcomes poses problems: it distorts learning and can frustrate the developmental process. There

is a common perception that NCLB's "high stakes" testing can create unwanted pressures for teachers of young children. Children may be pressured to succeed before they are fully able to perform at that level.

NCLB-generated testing pressures are also reducing time for the teaching, learning, sharing, and growing central to the success of early childhood education. Preparing students for testing changes how they are taught, for example, emphasizing rote instruction and drill at the expense of learning through discovery, hands-on activities, and play. Time spent on testing is time taken away from other learning methods.

As teachers are pressured to focus on "pre-academics" for young students, they are being forced to relinquish developmentally appropriate practices for young children and shortchange other types of learning that should be taking place: interpersonal communication, social awareness, emotional growth, love of learning, creativity, problem solving and thinking.

Accountability-Adequate Yearly Progress: NCLB's focus on student achievement helps to improve student learning while documenting the extent of the achievement gap and the need for high-quality educational programs and opportunities for all students. Young children learn within a wide developmental range. There is concern that applying NCLB standards and benchmarks to young children will not take these ranges into account. These developmental ranges are the most variable for young children with special needs.

Sanctions and Data Management: There were no perceived impacts on early childhood education and care related to sanctions and data management.

<i>Recommended Strategies that Could Lead to Achievement</i>
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Members of the early childhood education and care community who responded to the survey had a number of specific recommendations to strengthen early childhood education in general. Many of these recommendations deserve special consideration if NCLB is constructed to address early childhood. All of these recommendations are applicable for early childhood education and care efforts beyond MCLB.

1. *Teacher Quality:* Recognize the importance of highly qualified, licensed, and certified early childhood teachers. Work to ensure that early care and education providers receive appropriate professional development opportunities. Help strengthen and improve compensation levels for early childhood education and care professionals.
2. *Testing:* Explore the use of testing measures to monitor the growth and progress of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade children. We can find instructionally sound ways to measure student achievement in early childhood education and care programs. The progress and growth of individual children can be shown in a variety of ways including through standardized testing, criterion-referenced assessment tools, and observational data from teachers and family members.
3. *Accountability:* Explore the use of program assessment as an accountability measure. We can find appropriate ways to demonstrate the benefits of early childhood education and care programs, as well as those that measure program quality and help programs improve.

4. *Comprehensive Curriculum and Approaches:*

- a. Focus on child development by encouraging a comprehensive and community-based approach to meeting and advancing the educational, emotional, health, and social needs of children.
- b. While we should work toward universal access, we need to assure that we meet the special needs of homeless preschool children, young children in poverty, and young children with disabilities.
- c. Early childhood care and education programs should ensure that parents receive support, encouragement, and resources to participate actively in their child's learning.
- d. Curriculum must reinforce, not hinder, best practices, particularly using age- and developmentally-appropriate approaches. For example, emphasizing the importance of reading is desirable, but reading readiness skills must be strengthened in a play-based environment.

5. *Public and political awareness and commitment:*

- a. Recognize that the achievement gap already exists when the student enters school and that the only way to close the achievement gap is to assure universal access to quality early learning opportunities.
- b. Raise public and political awareness to recognize the importance of building a strong foundation of skills and learning through early childhood education and care.
- c. Make early childhood education and care a priority by providing additional funding for these programs.
- d. Local, state, and federal programs must work in harmony to provide affordable access to high quality early learning opportunities. Encourage and provide incentives to form and support mutually-beneficial partnerships among schools, child care, and Head Start (local, county and state).

For more information:

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